

Mindfulness of Breathing (56) Signposts for *Samādhī*

March 17, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

signposts, concentrated, mind, quietude, calm, signs, tranquility, settled, non-dispersal, non-agitation, non-decentered, non-fragmentation, book, Buddha, meditation, equanimity, *samādhī*, unification, concentration, stability, *nimitta*, light, *samatha*, serenity, *avyagga*, vibration, lightness, geometric shapes, steadiness, delight, rapture, nourishment

Gil Fronsdal

Some people are fond of reading books about Buddhism. If they want to learn about meditation, they might go find a book. Nowadays, some people may find an audio recording. The book we are trying to read is found within ourselves. We are learning to read ourselves – to read the signposts, the symptoms, the movements, the process of meditation that unfolds within us. That is the book to read. Or that is the audio recording to listen to – to really listen deeply to what is happening here.

Sooner or later, all we have to discover in Buddhism is meant to be discovered here in our own body – in our own experience. So learn to read the signposts. To read what is happening is part of the skill. There are signposts for *samādhī*, for developing concentration – the stability, composure, and unification of mind.

Nimitta, the Pali word for signpost, is usually translated into English as “sign.” Down through the history of Buddhism, *nimitta* is used in very different ways and has different meanings. Sometimes its meaning is reduced to being a visual image, which some people will see when their concentration gets strong. They may see light – perhaps white or yellow light – which lights up as they get concentrated. This image is called a *nimitta*.

In the early Buddhist tradition, a *nimitta* is any type of sign or indicator of the presence of something or that something is about to happen. The Buddha said the nourishment for *samādhī* – what feeds and supports *samādhī* – is two of these *nimittas* – two of these signposts that we can find, read, or recognize in ourselves. One of them is *samatha*, which means tranquility, calm, or quietude.

The other signpost is a word that means something like “non-dispersal,” “non-fragmentation,” or “non-agitation” of our thinking mind – part of this unification process of gathering together and being centered here. We’re no longer being decentered by spinning out. I think the Pali word that’s translated as “non-dispersal” may be read as “non-decentered.” So these are *nimitta*.

As we start getting concentrated and settled, with steadiness of mind – then, we recognize these signposts. To recognize that there is quietude, tranquility, or serenity – however, we want to translate *samatha*. And to recognize that we are starting to be non-decentered – to not be scattered or dispersed in our minds.

The mind is not jumping around, chasing every thought that comes along, or wandering off for minutes at a time in fantasies or thoughts. Instead, there is a real feeling now of being gathered in, being non-dispersed, being here. Neither one of these signs have to be very strong at first. We are learning to recognize that these are signposts pointing the way.

There might be a lot of agitation or dispersal of the mind. But, if we keep focusing on these, it is too easy to reinforce them. The nourishment for *samādhī* is to take in, to allow ourselves to experience, or to be supported by tranquility and non-dispersal of the mind – this centeredness of the mind

Even if there is a lot of agitation – maybe in the cracks of the mind or behind it, in the backroom, attic, or basement of it – to recognize: “Oh, there is a little bit there. Yes, I’m agitated. But, in fact, there is a little feeling of tranquility in my sternum and hands. My hands feel steady, confident, a little bit calm and tranquil.” So to find where it might be.

Don't manufacture it. Don't worry too much if you can't find it. What we are talking about now, as meditation deepens and deepens, is not just sitting down and, "Boom! You have to be able to do this."

But as you begin to feel yourself settling and getting calmer and more here, this is when you start to feel, to appreciate, affirm, and validate these signposts: "This is good. This is the path forward, the direction to go. Now I have picked up the book at the chapter where I left off. This is where I am picking up again now – the place where my practice is really deepening." So, to recognize these signposts.

There are two *nimittas* in Pali. The Pali word for one is *samatha* and the other is *avyagga*. *Agga* could mean "center." *Vy* is "divided" or "separated," and *a* means "not" – not separated from the center. So this idea of being centered.

There are a lot of other signposts for *samādhi*. Over time, you might learn different ones that can support you: "Oh, this is good. Now I am in the territory – this is the direction forward."

Just to recognize them. Not to be attached to them. Not to try to engineer or work too hard to get concentrated. But, for the mind, to simply begin recognizing: "This is the way forward. This is the path in the forest" – as opposed to being distracted by every little troll, bird, insect, and butterfly – chasing after them and losing the trail. So to gather ourselves together, and start feeling and recognizing these signposts.

Some of the other signs are feeling physical sensations, which shift and change and show we are getting concentrated. There can be tingling, a feeling of lightness, warmth, a glow. For some people, there is a strong feeling of physical pleasure. Sometimes a little bit of pressure or vibration begins happening someplace. Sometimes people feel it in the forehead, chest, or belly. Sometimes parts of our body, like the arms, start feeling so light. They may even seem to disappear because things are so tranquil and peaceful there.

There might be visual signposts. There might be a field of vision that starts to get completely white or some other color. Some people, when they get concentrated, will see little shapes – sometimes geometrical – in their field of vision. It is important not to get distracted by these visual images, especially if they are geometrical signs or shapes. But they are supportive. So take them in – in the background of your experience: "Oh, I am on track. I am getting this as a signpost that I'm getting concentrated – I am deepening here."

There are what may be considered more mental or emotional signposts. A common one is feeling joy, delight, or pleasure welling up. Sometimes it is even a sense of rapture when *samādhi* gets strong. A feeling of gladness or relief might be there.

Sometimes it is a deep sense of happiness – something that is more sublime, more settled – a sense of deep contentment in the quietude here. Sometimes a sign of getting concentrated is that the mindfulness, the awareness, gets more and more clear. In this clear awareness, there becomes more equanimity, which feels so good. We are less likely to be reactive to things.

Don't expect all these things to happen at once. Don't even try to memorize or look for all the things I've talked about. The two things that the Buddha emphasized as *nimittas* were *samatha* (tranquility, calm, or quietude) and the non-decenteredness, non-dispersive, non-scatteredness of the mind – the mind being composed.

Both *nimittas* are supported by two actions that the Buddha used when he instructed – as we might say in English: "Become concentrated." He didn't use the English word "concentrated" because he didn't speak English. Rather, he used two Pali verbs: "to settle" and "to steady" – to settle on something and to steady oneself on something.

So these four can be your signposts: settling on the breathing or in your experience; steadiness with your breathing; delightful, warm, content quietude, tranquility; and non-decenteredness – a feeling: "Ah, this is good to really be here – not scattered anymore."

Perhaps you can read the inner book. Read yourself – and see if you can find what supports, guides, and gives you a good sense of the term "hold onto" as you are developing concentration. Or be a cheerleader with support from the side: "Just stay there, be there. This is good. Keep opening to this; keep opening to this."

If you are not ready for that or it doesn't work because you are trying too hard or it is too much work – just put it aside. But, sooner or later, hopefully, you will begin recognizing your signposts for what it means when the goodness of *samādhi* – the goodness of being settled and unified – begins to come into play.

And then appreciate that. Validate and affirm that so the mind knows: “This is what is important. This is what is valuable.” Thinking about trolls, butterflies, and other things is useful sometimes – but not for the purpose of meditation.

Thank you all very much, and we'll continue tomorrow.